

Willow

One of the highlights of a beaver watching year is the arrival of new kits. Like most baby animals, they are irresistibly appealing. Even the most stalwart curmudgeon of my acquaintance exclaimed, “That is a cute baby beaver!” when I forced him to look at one. It surprises me, therefore, that Willow, the mother of the kits, does not dote on them as I would.

This year she gave birth on May 8. Although beaver kits are born fully furred and with their eyes open, they spend the first weeks of their lives within the dark security of the lodge. I awaited their debut impatiently. While I cupped my ears and listened for telltale squeaks from within the lodge, Willow sat beside me and nibbled rodent nuggets, floated around the pond, or worked on construction projects. I seldom saw her enter the lodge.

On July 7 at dusk, my impatience was rewarded when a pair of brand new miniature beavers paddled into view. I offered an enthusiastic welcome to the small creatures and heaped lavish praise upon their parents. The parents, resting on their elbows, lost in gustatory reverie, ignored babies and me. The little beavers swam to the shore and floated there, gazing at the peculiar scene—the bulky backsides of their parents flanking a strange, noisy animal. After marveling for several minutes, they discovered the poplar branches I had placed in the water. With their tails curled up out of the water for balance, they floated and chewed.

The bank I watched from is the remnant of a little meadow that now lies beneath the dark waters of the pond. When crossing that meadow a year ago, I nearly stepped on a snowshoe hare that had a run beneath the dewberry brambles. Dewberry, I thought, would be an appropriate name for a beaver born at this pond, and since I couldn't tell the two kits apart, they became the Dewberries.

The night that I met the kits, Willow returned for a second helping of rodent nuggets. She swam past her children without greeting them, but one of them followed her ashore and peered coyly at me



over her mother's back. This surprised me, since the beaver kits from the two preceding years did not venture ashore until the early autumn. I assumed they stayed in the water for safety, but did their parents teach them this behavior or was it baby beaver common sense? Willow offered no reprimand for the new kit's incautious adventure. This bold Dewberry returned to the water, but after Willow left again, both kits swam over to the shore and rose onto their haunches to scrutinize me. After a moment, both waddled out of the water. I reached my hand out toward them, and one walked up to within an inch before turning and bouncing back to the wet.

I strolled home that night with delight and concern wrestling for control of my thoughts. Were these babies too foolish to survive? Unless kits stay in the water they are easy prey for a number of predators. On the other hand, I had been developing a trusting relationship with this beaver family for three years. Maybe the kits' behavior was simply an outgrowth of that trust, and not a cause for concern.

Delight prevailed as the kits continued to thrive and entertain. On July 14, concern entered my thoughts again. Willow, usually the first beaver to swim up when I arrived, did not appear. Bunchberry, Snowberry, and one of the Dewberries kept me company. Although it was unusual for Willow to miss snack time, I assumed she had things to do elsewhere. Still, I stayed until eleven o'clock hoping to see the missing mother and kit. As I began walking home and neared the mighty Lake Dismal Dam, a beaver lunged into the water and slapped with her tail—Willow. I waited for her to come up so I could reassure her. She did not appear. This was strange. Concern romped through

my mind unhampered on the walk home.

On my next visit a few days later, Snowberry and Bunchberry showed up first, and then a Dewberry paddled up with Willow behind her. Willow did not come ashore right away, but swam wide arcs around me for a few minutes, the kit clinging to her tail. When she did come up, Dewberry followed, but soon returned to the water. Willow, never as fastidious as her sleek mate, seemed more disheveled than usual. On subsequent visits Willow's coat looked even worse, and when I shone a flashlight into her fur from behind, I discovered a series of lacerations. Only a bobcat's claws could cause such wounds through a beaver's dense coat. The missing Dewberry did not reappear. The evidence suggested that I had underestimated Willow's maternal virtues. Since her injuries occurred at the time the kit disappeared, I think it likely that she attempted to defend her kit from the bobcat. While I cannot say what she thought or felt, such an act requires valor.

Now, three weeks later, the remaining Dewberry behaves like a sensible little beaver. Instead of sitting in the shallow water to eat, she tugs a poplar sprig into the lodge to dine. She has learned on her own, apparently, to behave with caution. Willow's wounds have nearly healed. She rests on her belly beside me, eyes half closed, chewing diligently. She may be immune to the allure of "cute," but I no longer question her devotion to her kits. She has earned her stripes.

